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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA NEGOTIATES NEW AGREEMENT WITH UN TO MONITOR COCA CULTIVATION

REF: 08 BOGOTA 2315

11. SUMMARY: The Colombian government (GOC) and the United Nations Office of Drug Control (UNODC) in Colombia have signed a new agreement on how the UNODC conducts its annual coca cultivation census. The GOC requested to renegotiate the agreement after the UNODC reported a 27 percent increase in coca cultivation in 2007 compared to 2006. The GOC was displeased with the results, since they had a record year for eradication and said that changes in the way the UN's satellite-based Illicit Crop Monitoring System (SIMCI) conducts the census resulted in the increase in cultivation and the GOC threatened to end cooperation with SIMCI. The GOC subsequently determined that it was not feasible to contract out or take over the coca monitoring activities. The new agreement includes provisions to increase the frequency of coca monitoring and improve the verification of SIMCI's annual cultivation number. END SUMMARY.

12. Recently, the Colombian government (GOC) and the United Nations Office of Drug Control (UNODC) in Colombia signed a new agreement governing how the UNODC conducts its annual coca cultivation census and other work in Colombia and are about to make a public announcement. The UNODC, through the satellite-based Illicit Crop Monitoring System (SIMCI), carries out an annual census to determine illicit crop cultivation in Colombia in addition to six other drug source countries. The GOC, which provides financing to SIMCI to fund the cultivation study and adopts the annual SIMCI cultivation figures as the official GOC number, requested to renegotiate the agreement following UNODC's announcement in mid-2008 that coca cultivation increased by 27 percent in 2007 compared to 2006. The GOC, citing record eradication figures for 2007 and difficulty in finding coca compared to past years expressed surprise at the report and alleged that changes in methodology resulted in the increase. The GOC also threatened to break with SIMCI on the monitoring of coca cultivation (See Reftel) if SIMCI did not change.

13. In a November 2008 meeting of Colombia's National Drug Council, an inter-institutional technical committee created to study alternatives to SIMCI's cultivation census recommended that the GOC renegotiate its coca monitoring agreement with SIMCI instead of taking over the costly and complicated annual coca monitoring exercise. During the negotiations the GOC insisted on adding provisions to increase the frequency of coca monitoring activities and improve the verification of SIMCI's annual cultivation number.

14. According to the terms of the agreement, SIMCI will conduct the

annual cultivation census using the same methodology as in previous years - using a mix of high and low resolution satellite imagery, overflights to sample cultivation in key coca growing regions and making adjustments to account for eradication. The GOC asked SIMCI to respond to whether methodological changes in the 2007 census resulted in the reported 27 percent increase in coca cultivation. Colombia-based SIMCI officials acknowledged that the use of manual eradication data resulted in a several thousand hectare increase in the 2007 cultivation number but denied that using more high resolution satellite imagery compared to previous years represented a methodological change. Embassy Comment: While the use of higher resolution imagery may not be a change in methodology in a technical sense, it would almost for sure lead to an increase in the amount of coca observed.

15. The most important change to the agreement is that SIMCI agrees to conduct two coca monitoring exercises. The first will be on April 30 and the second on August 30 to supplement the final December 31 cultivation census. The inter-censal surveys will utilize a combination of high-resolution satellite and aerial imagery to sample cultivation in select coca growing regions and provide snapshots of cultivation trends throughout the year. The GOC hopes that more frequent cultivation information will permit policy makers to adjust eradication activities during the year and keep the GOC informed of any increases in cultivation at the end of the year.

16. Other changes include using aerial imagery for the first time and increasing the use of overflights to groundtruth cultivation estimates made from satellite imagery. SIMCI also agreed to take measures to integrate its geo-referenced cultivation data with

software programs used by the GOC's Geographic Institute (IGAC in Spanish) and update coca leaf yield studies for all coca growing regions in Colombia every three years.

17. The GOC and SIMCI agreed to increase funding to cover the costs of additional overflights, satellite and aerial imagery and other activities. The new SIMCI budget is USD 1.38 million and represents an approximate two-fold increase compared to previous years. The budget includes USD 883,700 for the annual census, USD 442,300 for the two inter-censal cultivation surveys and USD 54,000 to update yield studies. The GOC and SIMCI will continue to share the costs for the annual census and inter-censal surveys while the GOC will fund the overflights. For the first time, the budget includes line items to cover flight costs which previously had been absorbed by the antinarcotics police largely funded by the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS).

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Since the GOC publicly stated that it would consider breaking with SIMCI, the new agreement to monitor coca cultivation reflects the GOC's inability to devise and fund an alternative to SIMCI's cultivation work. It is unclear if the new agreement will result in better cultivation numbers from SIMCI or reflect the progress the GOC believes it has made in eradication. A renegotiated agreement satisfies the GOC's core demands that controls be added to verify the cultivation numbers and provide more frequent cultivation readouts so the GOC will not be caught off guard at the end of the year. The Embassy will seek out ways in which we can cooperate with the GOC and SIMCI on this issue. END COMMENT.

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